Teaching Listening Comprehension in Large Classes

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English language classes in a country like Nigeria are bound to be large, whether at the primary, secondary, or tertiary levels. The reason is obvious. The phenomenal expansion in student enrollment is not matched by a corresponding expansion in human, physical, or financial resources. The number of school buildings, language classrooms, and teachers has not increased, and where teachers are available for recruitment, they cannot be hired for financial reasons. Thus, at Ahmadu Bello University, where I teach, 50 lecturers in English are available for 4,500 students, giving each lecturer an average of 90 students per class. And with the shortage of classrooms, some classes are as large as 150 students!

The university students in these large classes are already disillusioned. After 12 years of English in primary and secondary school, they feel that additional study is a burden.

At the same time, they are being exposed to listening-comprehension activities for the first time in their education. They may have teachers who are new to the profession, and lack both training in ELT and confidence in their own mastery of English.

The goal of this article is to show that a lot can be achieved in teaching listening comprehension even under these adverse situations. It is possible to create an interactive, questioning, learning environment in large, impersonal listening-comprehension classes. (See Frederick 1987:76.) The approach to teaching listening comprehension in large classes described here is real. It was presented as a demonstration class for EAP lecturers at Ahmadu Bello University. The stages in this approach include the usual, i.e., planning, materials preparation, lesson implementation, and evaluation.

Planning

The planning stage took into consideration the personal characteristics of the teachers and the students. It operated on the principle of moving from the known to the unknown. For example, listening-skills teaching started with note-taking, a concept not entirely new to the students, and gradually moved to more complex concepts of listening for interpretation and critical evaluation.

Also, a choice of teaching strategy had to be adopted. From numerous alternatives, the teachers opted for strategies organised around *brainstorming, modeling* (let's do it), *practice* (let's practise it), and *application/evaluation* (do it yourself). We will come back to these teaching strategies later.

In the planning stage, issues like time allocation, task and activity type, and mode of classroom interaction (learner and text, pair work, intra-group, and inter-group) had to be settled. (See Coleman 1987.)

Materials preparation

Prior to the lesson, materials had to be identified and prepared. Since funds were limited, locally derived materials were relied upon. Other factors that influenced the type of materials produced were class size and type of activity. The funds available determined the number of materials to be produced, and this number invariably influenced the type of activity. To conserve funds, materials had to be shared between two or more students. Some of the materials produced for this lesson were:

A Sample Note-Taking Format. This sample format was designed and produced by the EAP teacher for students to study prior to the listening-comprehension lecture. The format consisted of a main heading, subheadings, and supportive detail. To cut down on cost, half of the number of copies needed (45 instead of 90) were produced and students worked in pairs to analyse the note-taking format.

A Sample of Lecture Notes. This sample of notes, produced by the EAP teacher from the lecture for peer assessment, was distributed after the listening-comprehension lecture. Again, half of the materials needed were duplicated to be shared, one between two students.

Flash Cards. These were medium-sized cards on which the topics to be discussed in groups were written. The large class size and time constraints meant that only nine flash cards (one per group) could be produced. Since 10 students (in a group) would be expected to read the

flash card together, it had to be boldly and clearly written with any irrelevant information removed.

Common-Controlled Activity Sheet. This is a one-page activity sheet duplicated for student discussion. Since the activity required filling in blanks, 45 copies had to be produced, one to be shared between two students.

Lesson implementation

Brainstorming. In this session, participatory questions were written boldly on the blackboard for students to discuss.

The various steps taken during the brainstorming session are outlined below:

1. Nine groups of 10 students were formed to tackle the participatory questions.

2. Individually, the students wrote down points that would answer each of the participatory questions.

3. The students were then asked to discuss the points identified by each student as a group working toward a group consensus.

4. Following the group discussions, the brainstorming session moved on to inter-group discussion. The EAP teacher called on volunteers from different groups to suggest answers to the participatory questions. Only the answers mutually agreed upon were put on the blackboard.

"Let's Do It" Session.

1. Pair work/assessment of the note-taking model: The peer group studies the note-taking models prepared by the teacher prior to the lesson.

2. Pre-note-taking activities: Motivational activities prepared the students for the subject matter to be covered in the lecture.

3. The actual delivery of the lecture: Individual students were asked to take notes on a lecture. Since there were not enough tape recorders to go around, the teacher had to read the lecture to the class. The large class size called for some modifications in the mode of the lecture presentation. The teacher's voice had to be loud, speech quality sharp, and eye contact encompassing, so each student felt the lecturer was looking at him or her. As much as possible, the lecture had to appear natural—attention was paid to the nuances of speech delivery such as false starts, pauses, hesitations, and repetition. Important points of the lecture were written boldly on the blackboard and attention was drawn to them as the lecture progressed. The lecture was made to fit into the regular lecture pattern, beginning with an introduction, then the main body of the lecture, the summary, and finally the conclusion.

4. Post-lecture assessment of notes: After the lecture, students were again asked to work in pairs to compare the notes they had taken with the sample notes already prepared by the EAP teacher but not distributed until after a trial note-taking activity. At the end of the assessment, the students were able to see the strengths and weaknesses of their notes as well as the similarities and differences between their own notes and the model produced by the teacher.

"Let's Practise It" Session. At this stage, students went back into nine groups of 10 for intensive practice activities. The activities were systematic, moving from controlled (fill in an incomplete outline) to less structured activities.

Each of the nine groups was given a flash card on which different tasks were written as follows:

Group 1: Write out the headings and sub-headings of this lecture.

Group 2: List the main ideas of the lecture.

Group 3: Give a supporting detail in this lecture that is used to expand each of the points raised in the lecture.

Group 4: List specific problems or errors you see in the notes that have been written by members in your group.

Group 5: List the various abbreviations used by the members of your group in their notes.

Group 6: List points written by the members of your group that you do not feel are necessary.

Group 7: Give reasons why you think the notes you have just taken on the lecture are valuable.

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Group 8: From the note-taking experience you just had, write down several points of advice for taking better lecture notes.

Group 9: From the note-taking experience you just had, write down several statements of warning to insure better note-taking.

"Do It Yourself" Session. Characteristic of this session was the fact that the activities were no longer controlled by the EAP teacher. It was assumed that the students had acquired sufficient listening-comprehension skills to be able to practise on their own with little or no teacher intrusion. Thus, in this particular listening-comprehension lesson, the students were asked to practise listening-comprehension outside the EAP class as illustrated below.

SAMPLE "DO IT YOURSELF" ACTIVITY

Now that you have acquired listening-comprehension skills, you are required for the next period to take notes on three consecutive lectures that are delivered in your respective subject areas, using an acceptable note-taking format. Be ready to discuss and display your notes in the next class.

Evaluation

Evaluation has always been problematic in large classes, but several options were available that were less burdensome on the EAP teacher. These included peer evaluation of the "fill in the blanks" exercises; group evaluation of the respective group reports; display of group work; exchange of notes; and individual listing of what the student had personally gained from the lesson.

Problematic areas

The listening-comprehension lesson just described above was not without some problems. As the problems arose, however, the EAP teacher tried to act fast to find solutions to them. The first problem was that of individual participation within the small groups of 10 students. In

order to make all of them participate in the group activity, each was asked to attempt the task individually before entering into group discussion. This measure, without a doubt, increased the level of participation within the groups. Another problem was that of rowdiness during group reports and presentations. Again, this was curbed by asking each student to jot down, in note form, what the group leader was presenting. By this activity, practice in note-taking was being intensified and whole-class participation enhanced, thus minimizing the usual rowdiness accompanying group presentation. Where necessary, the firmness of the EAP teacher also kept the noise down.

In order to avoid the monotony of group activities, which may lead to boredom, a variety of tasks and interactional patterns had to be injected into the lesson. It is customary nowadays to feel that grouping is the only solution to the problem of large classes. Thus, scholars are prescribing group activities to replace lectures and the excessive teacher talk typical of large classes. However, if care is not taken, we may be replacing excessive teacher talk with excessive group activities. In the listening-comprehension lesson just analysed, interactions at individual, peer, group, teacher/student, student/text, and teacher/whole-class levels were used to facilitate learning.

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